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An Apostle Too Radical for the Radical Perspective on Paul

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1. Introduction

One of the great privileges of being part of the academy is the immense pleasure of participating in fascinating conversations on topics of mutual interest. Prior to my review of the stimulating book *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*,¹ I had not had the pleasure of Professor Paula Fredriksen's acquaintance. I recognized many of that volume's obvious strengths, while nevertheless disagreeing with its core presentation of Paul. In response, Professor Fredriksen wrote a most gracious email expressing her gratitude for the review. So, being an editor who does not like to miss an opportunity to have a leading scholar contribute to the Expository Times, I immediately invited her to contribute a piece outlining her views for a wider audience. Again, Professor Fredriksen's response was more than generous. She said she would like to continue a conversation in which we both expressed our positions, as she felt this would best illuminate the debate for a wider readership. The two pieces contained in this volume are our offerings to readers as part of that conversation.

In this article when I refer to Professor Paula Fredriksen's views, I will refer to her either as Professor Fredriksen or simply as Fredriksen. Similarly, if I refer to myself I will refrain from using my first name. This is not cold formality.

Rather it seemed potentially confusing to have Paula and Paul debating about another Paul! I did contemplate initials, but Paul Fredriksen (PF) and Paul Foster (PF) brings no greater clarity either. So surnames it must be. What we both agree upon is that our namesake, Paul, matters. He remains a figure of undoubted importance in the religious landscape of world history. His ideas, whether represented accurately or refracted through the various prisms of later interpretation, have shaped the histories of several religious traditions.

2. Context or Content?

Professor Fredriksen opens her piece with a negative avowal. She states, 'I am *not* a theologian.' However, that appears to be a rhetorical strategy, rather than an accurate reflection of facts. In no small part, all those who discuss the Apostle Paul and his ideas, which deal with the relationship between God and humanity, are engaged in a theological enterprise. One might also point out that Fredriksen has also written extensively on Augustine – one of the greatest theological thinkers. Thus, it is difficult to accept this protestation of not being a theologian! Fredriksen is in fact immersed in, and

¹ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

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fully aware of the theological stakes involved in discussing Paul. Indeed, she is in fact a very learned theologian.

This disavowal of the label ‘theologian’, however, permits her to commence both her book and the piece in this journal from the perspective of a ‘religionist’, by describing the wider religious context of the first century Mediterranean world. There is much in that ‘thick description’ with which one must agree. She writes that ‘no bell jar separated diaspora Jews from their pagan neighbors.’ That is entirely correct. It is always a bug-bear when one reads a learned study treating some New Testament topic, which first lays out ‘the Jewish background’ and then ‘the Graeco-Roman’ background’, without recognizing that diaspora Jews and Hellenistic pagans lived cheek-by-jowl, and that these backgrounds were inextricably intertwined. Communities were typically small, and there existed permeability between adherents from different groups. Within this single Mediterranean world, in her book, Fredriksen represents Judaism as aflame with apocalyptic expectations, and she reifies that apocalyptic outlook through the prophetic vision of Isaiah that the coming age would result in the ingathering of the gentiles.² In this way, she situates Paul within this mixed Mediterranean world, as one who shared and was controlled by these burning apocalyptic expectations, especially those shaped by the Isaianic prophetic tradition.

The problem here is that context dominates content to such a degree that it flattens, and thus partially eradicates what Paul actually says. While there is absolutely no doubt that Paul lived in the first century Mediterranean world, that he was born a Jew, and was raised in a diaspora setting where Jews and gentiles lived side-by-side, he was not narrowly constrained by his context. What makes Paul such an important figure was that his thinking broke through stereotypical societal norms. His thought transcended cultural strictures, and he was not

narrowly bound by the structure of his context. In common with other truly great thinkers, Paul was able to critique his society and to see the limitations of his own context. He moved beyond the social confines of his own day. As a great thinker, his lasting contribution was that he presented a new vision for the relationship between humanity and the divine, which admittedly drew deeply on his Jewish heritage, but yet was not rigidly or simplistically constrained by that cultural indebtedness.

3. Paul’s Previous Identity

What motivated Paul to engage in a peripatetic lifestyle, and to forego his rapid advancement in Judaism was not, contrary to Fredriksen, a sense of incandescent apocalyptic hope. While it was indeed a revelatory event that caused the change, it was a revelation with content. It stemmed, according to Paul, from that moment on the Damascus Road when God intervened ‘to reveal his son in me’ (Gal 1.16). That ‘revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Gal 1.14) led Paul to a radical reorientation in his perspective. This in turn led to a break with many of his former associates, practices, and beliefs. Paul did not simply cease his persecution and desire to completely destroy ‘the church of God’ (Gal 1.13). Instead, in one of the biggest turn-arounds in attitude, Paul aligned himself with the Jesus movement, and he engaged in ‘preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy’ (Gal 1.23). Therefore, rather than an apocalyptic mindset, it was a new understanding of the identity of Christ that motivated Paul. Moreover, Paul himself received a new identity in Christ, that of a commissioned envoy called to preach Christ among the gentiles (Gal 1.16). This sense of divine vocation brought about a number of fundamental shifts in his self-understanding, his thinking, and his perspectives on the purposes of God.

For Fredriksen identity mattered in antiquity. However, she correctly cautions against conceiving this in terms of discrete ‘identity-bins.’ Hence she draws attention to the misuse

² Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle*, 25–29.

of such identity labels, '[h]istorians pitch our disparate data into these bins in order to compare antiquity's different "religions."' While identity was complex and multifaceted it mattered, and moreover, it mattered to Paul. In her book, Fredriksen, citing Phil 3.4-5, portrays the apostle's identity in the following manner: 'we must also consider the high marks that Paul gives himself elsewhere in terms of his own performance and commitment to Jewish tradition.'³ In my review, I challenged this by pressing Fredriksen to read on a few verses in Philippians 3. Paul's whole point is that while he once regarded things such as circumcision, Israelite nationality, membership of the Benjamite tribe, Pharisaic Torah observance, and even persecution of the church to be key markers of his self-identity, when he wrote this letter to the Philippians he then considered these things no longer to be his markers of identity. In fact he says they are to be 'counted as loss'. Thus they are worse than nothing, they are *skubala* – 'rubbish', 'scum', something to be cast away. Fredriksen's fresh response is that 'Paul speaks here in relativizing terms, not in absolute ones.' My response is a perplexed 'really?' In general, Paul does not strike me as a relativizing, moderating type of thinker. More often than not he sees things in stark binary opposition. He thinks in absolutes, and perhaps that is rarely more so the case than here. Fredriksen states of the things that Paul declares *skubala* that 'everything else – *skubala* compared to knowing Christ – seems still in place.' Again, this interpretation simply cannot stand. Among the items that are *skubala*, Paul lists his role as 'a persecutor of the church' alongside circumcision and Torah observance. Are we to really believe that Paul still defined his identity through his persecution of the church? In fact, Fredriksen has to exclude persecution of the church, and thus makes this the one exception in the list. Thus Fredriksen excludes the role of persecutor, which is seen as that part of his former life of which Paul was rightly ashamed. Here it is necessary to reject

this as a highly selective move, which cannot be sustained on the basis of normative exegesis. There is nothing in the passage that suggests Paul is referring to his former role as persecutor of the church in a way any different to that of his other former markers of identity. Therefore, the natural way to read this list is to see persecution of the church placed on the same level and treated in the same way as the other elements. To exclude it simply because it does not fit the interpretation being read into this text is at the very least an arbitrary type of exegesis. Paul does not signal any difference between the things he lists. The value of Torah and the worth of circumcision are not merely relativized for Paul, from his perspective they have been shown to be of absolutely less than no value – all these things are loss, and loss in an absolute sense. To underscore this point, Paul returns to it at the end of the letter. He states that the only thing in which he can boast is 'the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal 6.15). From this statement he draws the following implication 'neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' (Gal 6.15). Hence Paul reinforces his key point. Namely, that Christ believers are transformed into a new creation, and the previous categories of identity no longer apply for those who identify as being in Christ.

Against these previous identity markers, Paul redefines his identity in a new way. Throughout Philippians 3, Paul identifies himself repeatedly through his relationship to Christ. He says he has set aside the former identity markers 'in order that I may gain Christ' (Phil 3.8). Also, in contrast to his previous effort to attain a righteousness derived from the law, he states he now seeks the righteousness that comes through God that is based on the faithfulness of Christ (Phil 3.9). Furthermore, Paul states that what provides his sense of identity is being known by Christ, experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection, and being conformed to the likeness of his death. Particularly telling, Paul says that he forgets 'what lays behind, and reaches for what lies ahead', which is 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3.14). There can be

³ Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*, 123.

little doubt, if one permits Paul's statements to be taken at face-value, that in absolute terms he has disassociated himself from his former markers of identity. His identity has instead become predicated upon his relationship to Christ, and terms such as 'by Christ', 'in Christ', and other variations ring out as a refrain throughout Phil 3.7–15, as Paul repeatedly asserts the new way he self-identifies himself in contradistinction to his previous markers of self-worth. If any one wishes to dispute this and to assert that Paul's national or tribal identity remains unchanged and still in place, then Paul himself rebuts such ideas in Phil 3.20, where in common with the recipients of the letter he states that 'our politeuma is in heaven.' Rather than an ethnic or earthly patrimony, Paul says his politeuma – that is his citizenship, or perhaps better his state or commonwealth – is now based in heaven where his Lord Jesus Christ resides. This is indeed a new identity.

4. The Gospel – Law-free or Law-laden?

Another issue which Fredriksen identifies as a point of disagreement between the two of us is my reference to 'Paul's Law-free gospel.' In strong and clear words, Fredriksen expresses her disagreement stating 'There never was a "Law-free gospel," neither Paul's nor anybody else's.' She predicates this claim on the fact that Paul calls gentile Christ followers to worship the God of Israel, to refrain from idolatry, and to behave in line with traditional Jewish ethics. Again, it is helpful to look at the content contained in Paul's writings. In Galatians 3, Paul expresses his frustration – that is probably too mild, actually he berates those addressed for trying to conduct their lives through following the Law. In mocking tones, which cannot veil his anger, he asks the rhetorical questions, 'Did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?' (Gal 3.2–3). I agree with Fredriksen that Paul expected Gentile Christ

believers to behave in line with Jewish ethics. In fact, I would go even further than that, Paul believed that Christ followers are those who are finally enabled to meet such moral demands. However, what empowers them to do so is not the Law, but the indwelling gift of the Spirit. Paul's language is severe and sarcastic, directed against those 'who began in the Spirit,' yet who were in Paul's eyes surrendering that pneumatological freedom and instead making themselves subservient to the servitude under the Law – he tells them that they have been bewitched (Gal 3.1). In a culture that held strong beliefs in spiritual influences, Paul's charge was tantamount to saying that the Galatians were demonically deluded. Paul belabours his point throughout the remainder of the chapter. He states that 'it is evident that no one is put right (δικαιοῦται) with God by the law' (Gal 3.11). His counterclaim is that until the arrival of the age of faith in Christ (Gal 3.23) the law had simply possessed a restraining or pedagogical function (Gal 3.24). That is it taught those ethical behaviours that were required, but it could not enable people to meet those requirements.

However, Fredriksen again relativizes and limits the scope of Paul's comments in Galatians 3. Thus she comments,

Anything Paul says about Jewish law, then, he says first of all with reference to his gentile auditors. The Law was a curse *for gentiles*. The Law was a temporary schoolmaster *for gentiles*. The works of the Law, circumcision especially, was fleshly slavery *for gentiles*.

Again, it is necessary to ask what the text actually says. Does it say 'the Law was a curse for gentiles'? No, it speaks of a unified human state: 'cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law' (Gal 3.10). Does Paul say that the Law acted as a mediator and schoolmaster only for gentiles? Again the answer is a resounding no. Paul makes his temporal horizon clear when he describes this mediatorial and pedagogical role commencing four hundred and thirty years after the time of Abraham (Gal 3.17). That is from the

moment it was given to Moses, Paul describes the Law as keeping all custody (Gal 3.23) until the arrival of faith. The reading that Fredriksen derives from this passage can only be achieved by disregarding the details of the passage and argument that Paul bases upon those observations. Yes, undoubtedly he is speaking primarily to Gentiles in this letter, but not always primarily about Gentiles.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Paul concludes this chapter with one of his characteristic statements of equality and removal of distinctions: 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ' (Gal 3.28). Yes, Paul did indeed expect Christ believers to enact the kind of ethical behaviours that had been expected of Jews. However, for Paul the only means to achieve that morally correct lifestyle for both Jews and gentiles was through the indwelling and empowering presence of the Spirit. Here it is essential to take seriously and give due place to Paul's pneumatology in order to understand Paul's basis for believers to be ethically and equally enabled.

This perspective is not unique to Galatians. It is repeated elsewhere in Paul's writings. Addressing the Romans, he reminds them that 'we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter' (Rom 7.6). This virtually replicates that sentiments of Galatians 3. For Paul, Christ believers are no longer bound by the Law, they have been released from its restraining function. Instead, they possess a new mode of serving God, which Paul defines as 'newness of the Spirit.' The behaviours Paul expects from these Christ believers align with standard Jewish expectations of ethic conduct. However, the basis is entirely different. It is entirely free from the observance of the Law, from which there is a release. Instead, it is predicated upon the newness and enabling presence of the Spirit. If any further demonstration of this point is required, then Paul himself supplies it in the following chapter. First, Paul describes the Law as being feeble to enable ethical compliance: 'what the

law, weakened by the flesh, could not do' (Rom 8.3). By contrast, again Paul stresses that the ability to meet the moral requirements is finally possible without the Law, but instead through the gift of the Spirit: 'the requirement of the Law might be filled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit' (Rom 8.4). Fredriksen is correct to cite Rom 7.12, 'the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.' This is indeed Paul's strong belief because the Law was given by God. However, by reading this verse in isolation from Paul's larger argument in Roman 7-8 the entire thrust of the argument is missed or avoided. As Paul states the matter, this God-given holy Law had been weakened by the flesh (Rom 8.3), and was unable to empower those who followed it to live ethically fitting lives. For Paul, it is only through the sending of God's son in the likeness of sinful flesh and through a new mode of existence that he calls life in the Spirit that Christ believers are able finally to meet God's righteous requirements.

5. Paul's Views on Ethnic and Social Distinctions

The next issue that Fredriksen raises is the question of whether ethnic, gender, and social class distinction still remain in place for Paul. For Fredriksen the answer is an emphatic yes. She writes,

Paul also insists on gender distinctions within his *ekklesiai*. He facilitates the return of a runaway slave (Letter to Philemon). And like those scriptures whose authority he appeals to – especially Isaiah, especially in Romans – Paul distinguishes between gentile and Jew even at the End, once both are 'in Christ.'

Again, by considering Paul's own statements one is left perplexed by this assessment. Fredriksen sweeps aside the 'neither Jew nor Greek' type of statements that are cited on multiple occasions in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 12.13; Gal 3.28; Col 3.11). Even if one were to concede to Fredriksen that these statements

were ambiguous or mere slogans (although that does not appear to be the case), there is further evidence that Paul envisaged that his Christ communities would exist as groups where social and ethnic distinction had been removed. The case of Onesimus is a red-herring, with Fredriksen implying that Paul had him return to his master Philemon in order that Onesimus continue in his role of servitude. The letter is an emotive (if not manipulative) appeal to the Christ-believer and slave-owner, Philemon, from Paul. Thus, to evoke pathos Paul describes himself as ‘the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus’ (Phlm 9), and refers to Onesimus as ‘my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment’ (Phlm 10). Paul returns Onesimus presumably not to break Roman law by abetting a runaway slave. However, he does not want that master-slave relationship to remain in place. He tells Philemon that he receives him back ‘no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother’ (Phlm 16). Paul goes on to ask Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Paul offers to pay any losses that Philemon has incurred, but then not too subtly reminds Philemon that he in fact owes Paul ‘even you own self’ – just in case Philemon thought of sending Paul an account. So in this case Paul absolutely eradicates the distinction that formerly existed between this Christ-believing master and his believing slave. Contrary to Fredriksen, Paul in this case does not uphold that social structure that was prevalent in the Roman Empire. The new mode of existence means it is no longer sustainable for one believer to be the slave of another. Perhaps we might wish that Paul had categorically spoken out against the whole institution of slavery. However, his agenda was not our agenda. Yet in the instance of Onesimus, who had become a Christ believer, Paul certainly overthrew, and did not uphold, the prevailing social structure.

So what of the relationship between Jew and gentile? Apart from the three very obvious statements of equality which Fredriksen

considers to be equivocal or ambiguous, there is indeed more data to draw upon. In Romans 3.21–31 Paul stresses the equality of status of all humanity before God. Paul states that ‘apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been made manifest’ (Rom 3.21) and that such righteousness is available through Jesus Christ ‘for all who believe; for there is no distinction’ (Rom 3.22). Paul continues this discussion of the removal of distinctions and the universality of righteousness through faith in Jesus stating that all humans are put right by faith ‘apart from works of the Law’ (Rom 3.28), and that the necessity of faith applies both to the circumcised (by faith) and to the uncircumcised (through faith), (Rom 3.30). Here again, Paul states that the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles no longer pertain. Paul circles around this theme in the following chapters, but articulates it particularly clearly when he states ‘For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing riches on all who call on him’ (Rom 10.12). In this context there is no doubt that the term Lord (kyrios) refers to Jesus. Just a few verses earlier has explicitly made the identification of Jesus as kyrios: ‘if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Rom 10.9). Therefore, in Rom 10.12, the Lord who ‘is Lord of all’ is identified as Jesus, and he bestows riches on both Jew and Greek without distinction. Significantly, Paul makes these claims in a passage replete with salvific language. The combination of believing and confession of Jesus as Lord is presented as the indication of the certainty of salvation. Paul then states that this Lord Jesus is Lord of both Jews and Gentiles without distinction, and that everyone, both Jew and Gentile, must confess the name of Jesus in order to be saved. Again, Paul maps out the commonality of what is required from both Jews and non-Jews and he states that both are saved by the same mechanism, namely calling on the name of Jesus the Lord (Rom 10.13).

6. The Witness of the Pauline Tradition

The next response might seem like a strange move. The reason for that is it draws upon a letter that C.H. Dodd described as the ‘crown of Paulinism’⁴ and F.F. Bruce similarly labelled as the ‘quintessence of Paulinism’,⁵ that is Ephesians. The response can be anticipated – namely a protest that Ephesians is not a genuine letter of Paul. However, it should be admitted by all sides that determining authorship is a difficult and contested issue and many strong arguments have been made in defence of Pauline authorship. So in humility, admitting that I may be wrong, let me lay my cards on the table – I do not think Ephesians is written by Paul. Instead, I consider it to have been written maybe a couple of decades after the death of Paul, but by a person who was intimately acquainted with Pauline ideas and perhaps even with Paul himself. So why draw it into the discussion? Well precisely because it appears to distil the quintessence of Paulinism. Almost within ‘touching distance’ of Paul, the author of this letter makes the following statement:

Therefore remember, that formerly ... you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ... For He Himself is our peace, who made both one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph 2.11-16)

Here, writing in the name of Paul and in alignment with what are perceived to be his key

ideas, the author articulates Paul’s thought as involving a clear dissolution of boundaries between Jews and Gentiles – the dividing wall has been broken down. According to the author, old enmities have been removed, and those who formerly identified separately as being either Jew or gentile are told that as Christ believers they have been united into one body through the cross, here used metonymically to depict the death of Jesus.

It is easy to dismiss these sentiments as non-Pauline, and to assert that interpreters removed from the original context by twenty centuries are better placed to explicate Paul’s ideas than those who lived perhaps no more than two decades after his death and perhaps were close associates of Paul. It is too easy to colonise Paul’s writings with twenty-first century perspectives of religious tolerance and pluralism. To have a Paul who was happy to let Jews be Jews on their own terms, and who simply invited pagans to share in the gifts of God without having to adopt circumcision for male adherents. This all sounds totally reasonable, incredibly accommodating, totally wonderful, and yet, unfortunately, nothing like Paul. Instead of imperialistic and colonising readings, which shoehorn one’s desired pluralistic interpretations into the Pauline text, it is important to let Paul be Paul. Nobody needs to like his message, or to adopt it as normative for contemporary interfaith dialogue. However, the aim of scholarship is not to reinscribe the text of the epistles in order to generate the palatable Paul. Instead, the aim is to accurately map out Pauline thought, warts and all if that be the case, remembering that one is reading the ideas of a first-century thinker, not the concerns and agendas of twenty-first century visions of social pluralism.

The text from Ephesians presents us with a first century, non-Western, non-white, reading of the Pauline message, written by a person within the ambit of the Pauline circle. That author, who had perhaps been a direct associate of Paul, presents a key aspect of Paul’s message as the removal of distinctions, abolition of law observance, and the creation a new

⁴ C. H. Dodd, ‘Ephesians’, in F. C. Eiselen, E. Lewis and D. G. Downet (eds), *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1929) 1224–1225.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977) 424.

unified people of God. Such voices need to be taken seriously and due to their temporal proximity should be given a certain priority in interpretation.

7. The Scope of Paul's Mission

A key claim of the many representatives of the Radical Perspective on Paul,⁶ Fredriksen among them, is that Paul was solely concerned with bringing gentiles to faith in Christ. That is, as implied in the title of her book, Paul is identified as the pagans' apostle exclusively. Moreover, he regarded those who become Christ believers as being ex-pagans. They did not become Jews, but they were called to worship the God of Israel without the obligations of circumcision, or observance of dietary laws. In response I wish to raise a point where we differ in degree, not in absolute terms. However, that degree is significant because it says something fundamental about Paul's perspective on the ongoing validity of Jewish practices and faith.

Paul was indeed primarily concerned with calling gentiles to be part of new communities formed of believers in Christ. This was in fulfilment of his revelatory calling to preach the gospel to gentiles (Gal 1.16), and also of his self-understanding that he was appointed as apostle to the gentiles (Gal 2.8). However, while preaching the gospel to gentiles may have been the central focus of Paul's activity, it does not appear that he limited his missionary activities to gentiles exclusively. That Paul was active in persuading Jews to follow his own example and to identify as Christ believers is perhaps nowhere more evident than in 1 Corinthians. In a passage that depicts his

evangelistic adaptability, Paul writes, 'I became all things to all people, that by all means I might save some' (1 Cor 9.25). In this context, Paul explicitly states that the 'all people' he strives to bring to salvation includes Jews. This general concluding statement (1 Cor 9.25) is preceded by an explanatory declaration that describes how Paul approached this task in reference to both Jews and gentiles. Specifically in relation to Jews (since his evangelistic activity among gentiles is not in question), Paul writes the following: 'to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those under law as under law, though not being under law myself, that I might win those under law' (1 Cor 9.20). The natural and self-evident meaning of this verse is that at times (although not perhaps primarily) Paul did try to persuade Jews to become Christ believers.

However, there is something further of relevant importance here that should not be overlooked. Paul states, that 'to the Jews' (τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις) he 'became as a Jew' (ἐγενόμην ... ὡς Ἰουδαῖος). Similarly, he notes that to those under law he became as one under law himself. These would be incomprehensible statements from one who regarded himself as still being a Jew and as still being under law. On the contrary, Paul knows what is like to have been a Jew and to be under the law. Therefore, in order to facilitate his large goal of making as many Jews and gentiles become Christ believers Paul adopts the mindset and behaviours that characterised his former life and identity as a Jew, in order that he might persuade Jews to join with him in becoming Christ followers. This interpretation is supported widely by the major commentators on this passage.⁷

⁶ Some of the other representatives of the so-called Radical Perspective on Paul, or the Paul within Judaism viewpoint include Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (eds), *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015); Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

⁷ For instance, Fitzmyer comments 'the following clause explains the sense in which the Christian Paul now means his becoming "like a Jew."' Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, AYB 32 (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008) 369. Or as Thiselton perceptively observes, 'The phrases ὡς Ἰουδαῖος and ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον are especially revealing of Paul's theology of the new creation.' Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000) 702.

Importantly, this passage reveals two things. First, that on occasions, Paul was engaged in activities that were aimed at persuading Jews to become Christ believers. Second, that while in order to achieve this larger goal Paul was willing to adopt Jewish practices and compliance with the law, he no longer regarded himself as a Jew or as one compelled to observe Torah requirements.

8. Why Such Different Readings of Paul?

In many ways the most concerning issue that this discussion raises for me is the following question. How can two scholars, applying a close-reading of Paul's letters come up with such divergent interpretations? Asking that question is no strategy or rhetorical ploy on my part, it is a genuine and concerned reflection on the methods we are employing. One might point out some slight differences between the approach of Professor Fredriksen and my own, but largely the methods employed are the same. We both read the text of the letters in the original Greek; we are not applying any heavy-theoretical overlay or reading strategy; and we are both attuned to the religious context of the first century eastern Mediterranean world. So why such different outcomes? So without seeking to flatter, Professor Fredriksen is, beyond any question, a leading intellectual with a dazzling turn of phrase. In no way are her credentials in doubt, and it is acknowledged that she has pondered issues pertaining to Paul's identity over an extended period of time. So what leads to two interpretations, which, unfortunately, are probably irreconcilable?

Perhaps it is might be due to at least three factors, none of which I find particularly palatable to contemplate since they perhaps lead to an impasse in the academic conversation. One reason might arise from the different pre-suppositions and interpretative traditions of those reading the texts. A second reason might stem from the ambiguity of Paul's statements. This is not a reason I consider to be entirely

compelling. It strikes me that in the core structure of his thought, Paul is relatively clear and conveys a reasonable level of consistency. This leads to a third possible reason. Are the methods for reading the ancient texts faulty? To express this a different way, if this were an exercise say in complex analysis or quantum mechanics then a proof supporting a hypothesis would be published. If correct, then all scholars in the field would work through the proof and hence concur. If incorrect, the proposed proof would be rebutted to the satisfaction of all scholars. Now of course reading ancient texts is not the same as the strict logic of mathematics or theoretical physics. The concerning thing is not that the discipline of reading scriptural texts is less exact than the hard sciences, that is a *non sequitur*. The root concern is that I suspect in the end it is unclear what type of evidence could be provided by either of us to convince the other to adopt the alternative proposal. If genuine progress is to be made with such questions, then perhaps more work is required on the meta-level questions of what constitutes proof of a position and what should be accepted as compelling evidence.

The most significant contribution that I believe that Professor Fredriksen and I have made in this discussion is that of talking to each other. That is engaging in the Socratic dialogue of robust, rigorous, but nonetheless respectful disagreement. The process of pushing hard against each other's arguments will hopefully highlight where the strongest account of Paul's ideas is to be found. Though our mutual critiques of each other's ideas might be tough and even a little fierce, I can only thank Professor Fredricksen for spurring me on to think in more detail about why I continue to hold the views I hold.

9. Concluding Observations

In the end the most dissatisfying aspect of Professor Fredriksen's portrayal of Paul, and for that matter the similar portrayals of other scholars who represent the so-called 'Paul within Judaism' or 'Radical Perspective on Paul

(RPP)', is that they present a Paul who simply is not very radical. Why would any contemporary first century Jew have taken exception with Paul, or why would his supposedly exclusive work among pagans not have garnered wide support? On that reading, one is presented with Paul the Jew, striving to bring non-Jews to a place where they acknowledged and worshipped the God of Israel as the only God, and engaged in all the ethical practices required by the Law in obedience to that God of Israel. What could have been more congenial? However, history tells a different story.

Paul was seen by his former fellow Jews not as an apostle, but as an apostate. He was repeatedly lashed by 'the Jews' for his activities (2 Cor 12.24). Paul's autobiographical statements in Phil 3 present Paul as rebuffing his previous markers of Jewish identity and superiority based on an ethnic belief system. The disavowal of his role as a persecutor of the church is also part of a larger rejection of previous markers of self-confident identity. These are counted as nothing compared to the new identity that Paul derives from now being found in Christ (Phil 3.9). So what does this make Paul in terms of his identity. Perhaps Michael Bird's suggestion that Paul is an anomalous Jew deserves some close consideration.⁸ Yet even this does not seem to go far enough. Paul speaks of his former life in Judaism (Gal 1.13). So perhaps it is better to speak of Paul as a former Jew.

However, that is a negative or apophatic way of describing Paul's identity. It is probably better to describe Paul not by defining what he was not, or no longer was. Rather, Paul's own identity statements are repeatedly and regularly stated throughout his letter. He self-identifies in his letter openings as 'an apostle of Jesus Christ,' he refers to those he addresses as Christ believers – both Jews and Greeks ('to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek', Rom 1.16). Even

more compellingly, Paul himself includes himself in this designation as a Christ believer: 'also we have believed in Christ Jesus' (Gal 2.16). Paul speaks of this change of identity as the moment when 'I was laid hold of by Christ' (Phil 3.12). Therefore, it is clear that after his experience on the Damascus Road, when writing his letters, the identity that matters to Paul to the exclusion of all other markers of identity is that of being 'in Christ.' Paul considers himself a Christ believer before anything else. Is there a better term to describe him? Well maybe there is a single word term that would describe a Christ believer very well. However, to use it of somebody writing in the 50s and 60s of the first century would lay oneself open to the charge of anachronism. That would only be anachronistic by perhaps a decade or two, when it emerged as the common designation for Christ believers. Some may object that the term is an etic label. Well scholars often label data with external terms that aid classification and facilitates discussion – no electron ever came with the name 'electron' attached to it. Anyway, the term is not actually etic, it becomes emic a short while later and is used by subsequent generations of Christ believers as a self-designation. So rather than being etic or even slightly anachronistic, it would perhaps only be a premature use of the term. Yet, perhaps a slightly premature use of a term is not inappropriate for an apostle who considered himself *ἔκτρωμα*, or untimely born (1 Cor 15.8). However, in order to cause no offence, it will be simply noted that Paul, who spoke of his former life in Judaism, described his own new identity as being that of one had 'believed in Christ' (Gal 2.16).

So in the end, Paul is not to be understood as being in Judaism, but in his own words as being in Christ. Ultimately, Fredriksen, along with others representing the Radical Perspective on Paul, present a Paul who is anything but radical. This domesticated and congenial Paul is certainly not the Paul one meets in his own writings, and nor does that portrayal of Paul have the explanatory power to account for the

⁸ Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016).

negative reaction to him from those who were previously his fellow Jews. Rather, in his own writings one is confronted with a fiery and driven figure, a person who had undergone a radical change in his own self-understanding

that was caused by his prior change in his perspective on the identity of Christ, whom God revealed in him. This is certainly a radical perspective on Paul, but not one that emerges from a Paul within Judaism, but a Paul in Christ.